

[Wife Abuse Part II-India](#)

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## Wife Abuse Part II-India

When Does Trying to Be the All-Sacrificing, Suffering Sita Become Self-Destructive and Go Beyond the Call of Dharma?

Sujata Anandan, Bombay

Her husband and his brother shut her in a darkened room, removed the furniture, threw in rats and insects, locked the door and hoped she would go crazy. Terrified, she still braved their cruelty. Annoyed by her fortitude, the brothers then beat her-pregnant and defenseless-black and blue. Despite the torture, Nayana stayed quiet. But finally, three days after the birth of her child, when her husband wouldn't let her in the house, she went to the police. Nevertheless, the beatings continued. At last, refusing to suffer any more, she "screamed hysterically"-reads the case report that documents her breaking point.

Nayana (not her real name) is an air hostess with a leading Gulf airlines. Her husband and his brother are architects in a family firm-"educated, well off and so horrible!" Nayana shudders as she relates her grim tale. Eventually, the Bombay police, unable to refute the incontestable evidence of abuse imprinted all over her body, issued warrants for her husband's and his relatives' arrest. By then they were in hiding, but Nayana was finally safe. "They used me as their punching bag and almost killed my baby girl," she relates.

Why did they do this? What did she do to invite this? The brothers' scheme was to coerce her to willfully leave her own matrimonial home-an act that would excuse her husband from paying her compensation he would have to give if he were found guilty of forcing her departure. Her older child, a son, had already been spirited away by his relatives. The daughter was not considered important to him, so he left her with Nayana.

Then, eager to get out of paying for her upkeep altogether, her husband spread rumors that he was not the girl's father. Outraged, Nayana slapped a paternity suit on him. The courts intervened, awarded her full custody of both children and ordered her husband to settle with a heavy sum to her for the children.

The nightmare is over. Today Nayana is divorced and, relatively, happy. She explains the real cause of the abuse. "My husband harassed me at the behest of his brother whom I had turned down before I married his younger sibling who figured if he couldn't have me, neither could his brother."

Pushpalata was the wife of a ranking civil services officer who, at one time, ran the entire administration of the state of Maharashtra. He terrorized her from day-one of their marriage and kept up with a girlfriend on the side. He would beat Pushpalata for almost anything: sending the servants to the market without his permission; admitting her four children to school; serving him tea that went cold because he was too busy to drink it while hot; asking him for housekeeping money. Once he beat her so severely she was hospitalized-and this he allowed only after his children pleaded with him. The delay in medical attention caused her a loss of a kidney. All this while, the local police refused to register any of her complaints. They were frightened to take action against him because he was the one who would officially have to sign "Confidential Reports" that detailed his beatings of his wife.

When Pushpalata was discharged from the hospital, her husband beat her in the kidneys. She was again hospitalized. Her lawyers, with reluctant police support, swung into action. The senior state official was arrested. But to date, the case remains undecided. Mother and children, however, are safe.

Then there is the Punjabi pilot who fell in love with a Rajput air hostess. On their honeymoon he bashed her up "over a trivial matter." Soon thereafter his family's harassment over her "inadequate dowry" triggered regular physical and emotional torture until one day she attempted suicide. When Meena discovered love letters from another air hostess, she moved to her parental home. But he wooed her back by taking her out to an expensive dinner. The same evening he lured her into his new flat and started to beat her up when she refused to have sex with him. Badly bruised, she somehow managed to open the neighbor's door and call the police. They divorced and he remarried another air hostess. Meena is flying another airlines and wants to stay single.

A top positioned news correspondent in Bombay abandoned his heavily pregnant wife (photo right) at a shelter for prostitutes and destitute women under a false name so no one could find her. Her siblings finally did locate and release her. Another time he locked her out of the house all night with their week-old baby. He told his colleagues she was a "call girl." But her refined nature alerted them that he was lying. Today they are standing witness for her in the courts.

Then there is Vandana (photographed below during happier days), a dentist who recently married a pediatrician. The joys of marital intimacy soon got ugly. Vandana's husband sexually abused her, often forcing himself on her against her wishes, even while she was heavily pregnant. As a result, she aborted one of the twins she was carrying. She was also battered by his family for refusing to make her parents give them more dowry gifts.

Two common denominators link these cases. Firstly, a philandering husband and secondly, interfering in-laws. "It is amazing how most of the cases I have come across over the years have the same thread running through them," explains Radha Ghosh, a social worker and psychiatrist. "The moment a man begins to ill-treat his wife, if it isn't a demand for dowry, you can rest assured he is suffering from the 'other woman syndrome.' Also there is this traditional belief among certain sections that a woman must be beaten from time to time 'to be kept in line.' I have had a case where a father, from a well-heeled family, beat his wife in front of their son each evening and claimed to be training the little boy on how to keep his own wife under control in later years. 'This is how you must catch her by the hair and punch her in the underbelly -it leaves little trace of violence,' was how he put it to his son."

N. N. Mistry is an additional police inspector, attached to the Bombay police commission's social security cell that deals mainly with matrimonial disputes. He and his colleague Inspector R. R. Gaonkar and superior Senior Inspector D. M. Gavandi insist that separation of a woman from her abusive husband should not be the first step. He argues it is in the interest of the wife-"and not out of chauvinistic considerations" that they try to reconcile the couples by prevailing upon the family members to desist from interference, advising the couple to make a separate home for themselves or in cases of dowry demands, "by giving the husband's side an "understanding" which is policese for a stern warning prior to arrest. When all these fail, they adopt methods like humiliating the man and his family before neighbors. Policemen contend the law against harassment of women is not a deterrent as much as a serious obstacle for reconciliation. This is because Section 498-A of the Indian Penal Code makes beating, mental or physical torture or general cruelty to a

wife by her husband and his relatives a non-bailable offense. Once in jail, the husband has no way out and this public humiliation on a domestic dispute leads invariably to the break-up of the marriage.

"And why shouldn't it," responds Amir Bhowmik, a lawyer for battered women. In his extensive experience, husbands who end up convicted under 498-A are not your once-in-a-while wife slappers. They are habitual batterers. "No woman rushes to the police over a domestic dispute, unless she is at the end of her tether," asserts Bhowmik.

Oddly, wife-beating in some parts of India is openly condoned. "Do you know that in several communities like among the Bheels and the Wadars, it is considered an honor if a woman is beaten up by her husband?" shares Gavandi. "The more he beats her the more he loves her, they believe. These women actually let the men get away with this physical torture and brook no outside interference in their dispute. So where does that leave us and the law?"

Police rationales like this that justify wife abuse infuriate Bhowmik. "Every woman is a 'mother of mankind.' A wife should be treated equal with her husband. We need a total uprooting of the Manusmriti which says a woman is to be forever subjugated by father, husband and son; the man always superior, the woman with only as much right as he accords her."

Madhu Kishwar, India's most well-known and respected champion of fair treatment and improved social status for women, addresses the issue of wife abuse constantly. "Families differ in their opinion of how much violence a woman should tolerate," she remarks. "Some would advise her to put up with verbal insult. Others would even consider a few slaps tolerable. Few would openly condone torture or severe battering." She feels the widespread incidence of violent, physical abuse is excused by a culture that accepts sudra-like subordination of wife to husband, including the husband's right to inflict violence, "as a part of the marriage deal."

Manushi, an informative and insightful journal about women and Indian society which Kishwar edits, conducted a survey on marital violence. It concluded, "Almost anything can become a cause for sparking off violence. There is no predictability in this matter. But once violence begins, it tends to escalate if the woman puts up with

it." Kishwar points out that in all cases except dowry, society tends to side with the man rather than the wife. "She must have done something, after all," is the routine logic. "A man who inflicts violence on a wife because she is 'disobedient,' talks back, 'neglects' housework or insists on maintaining ties with her natal family against his wishes, tends to be exonerated." A wife is beaten if, when and because the husband knows she has no option but to endure, no place to go and hence no way to resist. This is where her natal family plays an important role to come to her aid. For this reason, Kishwar feels this bond should never be severed.

Though the law of karma will bring abuse back to the abuser in this or a next birth, Hindu society is increasingly unwilling to license abuse with this passive, "it's all karma" rationale. More and more Hindu women, and men, are demanding Hindu society adopt a stance of zero-tolerance for mistreatment of women.

## A Hindu View

Wife abuse is not the exclusive and secret shame of Hindu society, nor India, nor even Asia. It's a strange beast that has haunted every society, in varying degrees, levels of tolerance and ruses to remain at large. It's not new, and, like cancer, not traceable to one cause. It's not, as many assume, simply a Jeckle and Hyde by-product of today's stressed-out lifestyle that, by forfeiting quality family life for lucre, has littered the globe with a generation of dysfunctional families. Nor can we totally blame Indian movies and pulp fiction novels that glorify rape and dehumanize women as sex toys. Nor did the Manu Smritis that reduced women to sudras and the "property of her husband" invent wife abuse. Nor did men first get the idea to abuse women from the medieval Hindu writings that alleged women are eight times more sexually excitable than men, so need to be "subdued." It's fueled by all these, especially by a pernicious dowry system but also many, many other factors.

And it is worth stating the obvious-every abused wife is not 100% blameless. From her karmic past or present actions, she has, in some degree, attracted disharmony. But the inviolable Hindu law remains: nothing, absolutely nothing, sanctions a man to hurt his wife. That is himsa, violence, nothing less.

Where women are respected, there the Gods rejoice; where they are not, no sacred rite yields rewards. -Manusmriti

If any man treats his wife as a slave or subordinate and thinks that she is meant for cooking and procreation only, it is a heinous crime. -Swami Sivananda

Women are the living embodiment of the Divine Mother. -Swami Vivekananda

Men treat women with contempt, but women possess more virtues than men. Men owe their birth to them; Ungrateful wretches, how can happiness be your lot when you condemn them. -Brihad Samhita

If a wife allows herself to be constantly harassed in the name of dharma, it is not dharma at all. -Swami Jyotirmayananda

## South Africa:

Report by Rajesh Jantilal, Durban

"As soon as Rajen came home, he would be all over me," related soft-spoken Vanitha. "He used to get upset with me if the tea was not given to him on time. Little things. I used to be punched and kicked in the stomach and mouth." But she kept silent. To their friends they always appeared the beautiful couple. Vanitha, a lawyer, and Rajen, an educator, regularly attended religious events smiling-she elegantly attired in a sari and he in a silk kurta. But finally, "I couldn't take it anymore," Vanitha relates. "I turned to God for help. I am a Hindu woman and, according to our scriptures, the wife is just as equal as the husband. Look at our Gods-Krishna and Radha, Shiva and Parvathi. So what about us? There is no great Hindu saint or great scripture that says women are inferior to men." Rajan admitted he was ashamed: "It's like a disease. I just did not have control over my passions and emotions. I was hurting the people I would give up my life for." Still, both agreed to separate, resolving not to divorce. "It was just not in me to divorce," says Vanitha. "Maybe it was that religious feeling when I walked around the fire seven times at our wedding and a bond was created that felt divine. I did not want to give up then, nor now. Hindu women are strong."

Rajen then befriended a young priest at a local temple. "For 8 months he

counseled and guided me and made me see the light," says Rajen. "He gave me examples of good conduct from the Ramayana. I then began to accept my faults and finally sought professional help." Dr. Anshu Padayachee, a senior lecturer at the University of Durban-Westville Criminology Department feels more temple priests, like the one who helped Rajen, need to take responsibility to help. Padayachee heads an abused women counseling desk at the university, but assesses, "What we really need is for wife abuse and marital rape to be declared a crime so the wives don't have to feel guilty or hesitate about taking legal actions against their husbands."